

The Creation of Modern Athens

Planning the Myth

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A thens, 1834

Twenty-one guns saluted young King Otto's disembarkation in Piraeus, the port of Athens, on the morning of 1/13 December 1834. This was the scheduled date for the transfer of the Greek capital from Nafplion to Athens.¹ It had been raining constantly for two weeks. It cleared just before Otto and his entourage were about to enter the new capital, where he was received by the Bavarian regents, the ministers of the interior and foreign affairs, and the municipality of Athens (Fig. 1).²

The royal cavalcade moved towards Athens. Preceding his retinue, the king entered the capital on horse. Outside the walls, on the small hill of *Staktotheke*, gathered the Athenians who had come to welcome their young sovereign. Gypsy's Gate, the main gate leading into the city, had been transformed into a triumphal arch with laurel and olive branches draped around it. Along with his entourage, the city administration, and all the citizens, Otto entered the new capital in the midst of excited acclamations³ and headed towards the Church of St. George, the converted Temple of Theseus.⁴ One of the Athenian elders formally welcomed the young king: "Those who reside in this city of Your choice salute You, O King! Your happy arrival here will mark a new epoch, being the beginning of noble hopes, not only for the Athenians and the rest of the Greeks, but for all the civilized world. . . ."⁵ After the ceremonies Otto crossed the narrow streets of the town and arrived at his residence, the house of Alexandros Kontostavlos, which was purchased by the government. Built in 1832 and consisting of seven or eight rooms, it was the best available residence in Athens.⁶ There, the young king received the garrison, the municipality of the town, and representatives of the foreign countries. In the evening the Acropolis was lit with fires.⁷

Athens, with a population of about 12,000 at the time,⁸ had not been the only candidate for the seat of the government. Local interests from different parts of the

barren Attica, which all the Greek world, educated by the long Revolution and not by archaeological phantoms, rejects unanimously.”¹² The opposition continued even after the announcement of the decision to transfer the capital. According to most local observers Athens was not ready to become the capital yet. There existed no public buildings that could house any of the government functions. The money spent for the erection of such structures could be better spent first in agriculture, commerce, and education, all in desperate need of resurrection.¹³ A few years later, the argument went, the country would be in a better position to undertake the burden of transferring the capital.

Nevertheless, the attraction of the idea of classical Athens, so dear to the Bavarian government, did not leave the Greeks unmoved. Increasingly, in fact, the Greek inhabitants began to view Athens through the eyes of the classicizing Europeans:

*Renowned Athens, which maintains our indelible respect, deserves to be glorified. But it is glorified because our government declared it, rightly, the capital of the prefecture, because eventually it will be in the position to assume the place of the Royal Seat, but even today it is the seat, the metropolis, of the Lights, because the Gymnasia, the Lycea, the Odeia, the Academy, and all the other renowned institutions of the past are being reinstated. Finally, Athens is glorified because it will continue to exist for eternity, famous in and of itself, by virtue of its most respected legacies.*¹⁴

Georg Ludwig von Maurer, one of the original members of the regency, analyzed the inappropriateness of the rushed transfer of the capital in his encyclopedic study, *Das griechische Volk*.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Maurer himself did not escape the classical attractions of Athens. For him, as for the rest of the Bavarian government, the choice of Athens as the capital was inevitable: “But in favor of Athens came all those memories of the Attic civilization, of the arts, the sciences, its immortal military glory. . . . Which king could choose a different seat for his government, [instead of] . . . the intellectual center of the world?”¹⁶ Maurer believed that the transfer should have taken place on 20 May/1 June 1835, when King Otto turned twenty and was legally able to assume full governing authority. Then the state would have been spared the huge expenditures required to establish the regency in Athens.¹⁷ Moreover, the climate in the spring would have been better than in the winter, and the work of the regency would not have been interrupted.¹⁸ A better-organized government would have anticipated these problems and prepared for the transfer adequately. Instead, the transfer was done in such apparent haste, “as if the land of Nafplion was burning under the feet of the regency.”¹⁹

Even though the Athenians supported the decision to transfer the capital, they strongly objected to the government’s process. Members of the army and the state

his entourage were met by the town elders and the rest of the inhabitants.²⁴ One of the town elders offered Otto a large living owl, a second an olive-tree branch, while a third elder greeted him as follows:

King!

. . . The industrious, peace- and freedom-loving people of Attica offer sincerely their hearts and arms to Your throne, King, certain that, through You . . . our struggles will be crowned, Athena with Demeter and Hermes having again returned to our city.

You, Heroes of Salamis, lamenting our chains for so many centuries . . . have already raised your head, with a joyful eye, to see your city resurrecting and becoming the seat of wisdom and good government.

*Long Live the King!*²⁵

Continuing through the city, Otto and his entourage arrived at Hadrian's Gate, which was turned into a triumphal arch with a large laurel wreath and the inscription: "Athens, once the city of Theseus and Hadrian, is now Otto's city."

What were the conditions in Athens on the eve of the transfer of the capital there? Contemporary travellers agreed that Athens simply did not have the buildings appropriate for a capital. Yet, while the foreign travellers focused on the destroyed built fabric, the Greek residents looked for signs of life.

"The town of Athens is now lying in ruins. The streets are almost deserted: nearly all the houses are without roofs. The churches are reduced to bare walls and heaps of stones and mortar. There is but one church in which the service is performed," wrote Christopher Wordsworth in 1832–3.²⁶ "It would be impossible for me to describe the first impression which this completely devastated town and its protruding ruins made on me at my arrival," wrote the young architect Christian Hansen in 1837. "Only a few of the houses had a roof and the streets were completely unrecognizable, because everything had collapsed in boundless confusion. The surrounding beautiful fields, too, looked as though they had never been cultivated."²⁷ Some of the travellers compared the devastated landscape they encountered with the near-idyllic descriptions of Athens in the 1800s, as depicted in the well-known works of Chateaubriand and Pouqueville (Fig. 2).²⁸

Since the time, in 1806, that Chateaubriand visited the city of Pericles, each house had its garden planted with orange trees and olive trees. Certain houses in particular did not lack propriety or elegance. The people seemed to him gay and content. Nevertheless, the travellers then bewailed the fate of the city of Minerva. What would they say today, now that the



Fig. 3. E. Dodwell, *The Bazaar of Athens*. The engraving depicts part of the bazaar, with the Tzisdarakaki mosque in the background. E. Dodwell, *Views of Greece*, London 1821. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 25187.

expressed their dissatisfaction with the general state of affairs and with the Bavarian court by scrutinizing the physical conditions of the capital. The argument was that Athens was not as clean, safe, or pleasant as a European capital ought to be. And it was the responsibility of the government to ameliorate the situation. Despite their critical attitude, however, newspapers provide us with no concrete evidence of discontinuity in the city's daily life. There were no descriptions of "deathly scenes of abandonment." Rather, the press depicted a picture of feverish political and building activity.

Nor do we encounter expressions of romantic pessimism in the memoirs of General Makrygiannes, one of the few firsthand Greek accounts of the period. Having fought in Athens, he returned there with his family in May 1833. His description of Athenian life has little in common with those of most European travellers. Alongside the endless party plots and the underlying political instability, Makrygiannes also depicted a manifest optimism and energy that charged the country, and Athens in particular, especially after the arrival of King Otto in Greece.³¹ The fact that Makrygiannes chose to make his home in Athens shows that the city projected an attractive image to the Greek population. The following description of the weekly bazaar, written in the years 1832–3, further illuminates the city's healthy economy:

*rich stuffs, and silver-chased pistols, dirks, belts, and embroidered waistcoats – these are the varied objects which a rapid glance of this street presents to the spectator (Fig. 3).*³²

The bazaar was the most important economic feature of Athens both before and after the War of Independence. The city was thus able to recover, up to a point, and grow as an economic center long before the physical envelope was repaired and rebuilt. I believe that the “complete devastation” that most foreign travellers perceived concerned primarily the built environment. By contrast, the optimism of the local population was based on the potential for economic growth. The eventual transfer of the capital there, rumored since 1833, helped Athens achieve a speedier physical recovery (Fig. 4).

By 1900 Athens, a city of about 125,000 inhabitants,³³ featured several well-designed streets, tree-lined squares, and imposing civic and private structures. In the following pages we shall examine the transformation of Athens from a minor provincial town to a modern capital, and the significance of the built environment in forging the identity of the modern Greek nation. Our primary focus will rest on the process of urban design and on the role of the Greek citizens in shaping their environment. Before we concentrate on planning and architecture, however, let us first examine the political and economic conditions in Greece and the state’s efforts to forge a common national identity among the Greek population.